

What is Faith?

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Folk Tale: Once upon a time there was a humble nun which in Pali, the ancient language of Buddhism is called Ani. The Ani I want to tell you about was devoted to the great lady or Goddess Tara. Tara means star in Sanskrit, the great protectress, and guardian of great journeys. Every morning as the dawn emerged Ani would climb to the roof of the building where she lived, clasp her hands together and she would greet the emerging dawn with loud songs of praise, prayers and chants to Tara. She did this with deep and joyful devotion. Because she chanted so passionately, others could hear her. One of her neighbors was a scholar of religious text. When he heard her every morning he knew that she often got words wrong or in the wrong place. When she sang it was often the wrong tune. With each passing day he became more and more aggravated and frustrated. He looked out his window and watched her in frustration. But to his shock in the mist of the early morning mist, he saw an old Tara limp across the roof toward the Ani. He thought to himself she must be limping because of all the mistakes that Ani is making. That very day he knocked on Ani's door. He told her of her many mistakes and offered to teach her the correct way to sing, pray and chant. She agreed to become his student and working with the same kind of devotion as she had prayed, she learned the correct way to perform her daily devotions. Each morning she would sing and the scholar would smile. He finally looked up to the roof and realized that Tara no longer visited. He was exceedingly puzzled. For many days he thought and thought. He knocked on Ani's door again. Ani, I realize that it was I that was mistaken, not you. Your prayers are the right prayers, not mine. You know the correct way to sing praises because you do so with all your heart. Please accept my apologies and go back to the correct way. She did and Tara came once again.

Ani did know something, which is that faith is about more than what we believe. It is about intention and purpose. What I want to do today is redefine and hopefully liberate the word faith—to make it more palpable to religious liberals. Faith has been too narrowly defined, and justifiably we have been uncomfortable with it.

Religious scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith defines faith as a capacity to live at more than a mundane level, to see, to feel, to act in terms of a transcendent dimension.

Faith is not a commodity, as we have been led to believe, that we either have or we don't have. In the original language of the Buddhist texts, Pali, the word "saddha" is usually translated as faith. It is defined as confidence or trust and hospitality. It literally means to place one's heart upon. To have faith is to offer and open one's heart. In Pali faith is a verb. It is not a singular state that we either possess or we don't. Now, I realize that this definition of faith is pretty different than how we usually think about it, if we think about it at all. But for far too long we have let the Fundamentalists define faith for us and they do so in limiting and confining ways. "Saddha" also means a willingness to take the next step, which places faith much more as a journey than as the destination. It is not a static state, it seeks to be open in the way the poet Rumi invites openness in the poem, *Being Human is a Guesthouse*, where he writes:

This being human is a guest house
every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
 some momentary awareness comes
 as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all,
even if they're a crowd of sorrows
who violently sweep your house
empty of all its furniture.
Still, treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out
 for some new delight.

To offer one's heart is to give of one's vital energy. To have faith in something even if it is something that can't be seen, touched or even named is to offer something from deep within ourselves. It's not like offering a lock of hair or something we were planning to discard anyway, but something deeper. To offer the heart with full respect for the power of that offering, means looking carefully and intently at where our faith is being placed.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism is a saving faith and I made this proclamation when we first arrived in St. Paul. I think saying that one sentence did more to grow the memberships of the other local UU congregations than anything else. Because what I didn't do is explain what I meant by faith, so people heard me only in traditional and narrow terms and they left before I had a chance to explain what I meant when I said that we do have a saving faith.

When faith is seen as something you either have or you don't, then doubt and questions have no place, which is why so many of us are uncomfortable with the word. Faith is strengthened by doubt and questions, because it is the discernment process itself that helps us understand what we really do value, where we do place our hearts. Once we have some sense of that then we can begin to place deep trust in our own findings.

The Buddhists call this skillful doubt. Skillful doubt is not questioning without a purpose, or that questioning that simply distances us from the things that make us uncomfortable. It is questioning that moves us closer to the truth for ourselves and eventually to the truths that form a foundation of a larger reality where we might touch that transcendental dimension.

Mother Teresa's journals reveal a woman plagued by doubts and uncertainty, loneliness and longing. I read her words and I feel for her need to have God with her and the ensuing crisis of faith when that presence wasn't felt in her life. Because doubt had no place in her faith, she experienced its presence as confirmation of her lack of true faith. Many of us have had crisis of faith. These crises of faith might not be defined or expressed in the same way as Mother Teresa's but are similar in their disappointment, dissolution and despair.

The Buddhists outline stages of the faithful journey that I find very helpful that have validity for religious liberals as well. The first they describe is bright faith. Bright faith is like falling in love. We experience bright faith when we come upon an idea, a teacher, a methodology, a religious community that feels right, that feels like home or a destination. With bright faith we can feel exalted as we are lifted out of our normal

patterns. I know I have experienced bright faith when I have come in contact with a few great teachers in my life.

Bright faith is only the beginning however and often isn't enough over the long haul when one faces the challenges of reality or a crisis of faith. Just last week I was talking with a member here. He described what it felt like to find Unity. "Finally!" he thought, "A place where I am at home religiously." He was enthusiastic, like a new convert. The church was perfect. He kept coming and we know what happened. He realized we weren't perfect, that we were, after all, a congregation made up of very human people full of foibles and problems. He also became very aware of the various ways we fall short. He saw the ways that we are hypocrites. He stopped coming so consistently for awhile and when he did come mostly what he saw were the warts and problems. He lived out the reality of what one of my mentors says about congregations; that we're a hospital for sinners not a hotel for saints. He kept coming and his bright faith changed into verifying faith.

Verifying faith is the process of examining in a critical and discriminating way the people and institutions that inspired the bright faith. The Buddha likened this process of investigation to the method of analyzing gold. The gold is scorched with fire, then cut and rubbed to test for its purity. We do the same with faith: we see if the shining lessons hold up in our lives.

If our bright faith does not mature into verifying faith, then we can get stuck in blind faith. Blind faith, as we know so well, is the inability to hold other truths from the ones that elicited our bright devotion. It is to refuse ambiguity and paradox which is at the heart of our liberal faith.

But even verifying faith is put to the test when we put it into practice. It is put to the test by the challenges we face by simply trying to live our lives. So I ask, is your faith something that guides you in living out your values? Is it something that provides solace in times of struggle? Is it something that you can put into practice? Is it something that you can imagine giving your heart to when the stakes are high and lives depend upon it? Does your faith sustain you in the lonely and broken times that every human experiences? Does your faith provide some kind of refuge when life challenges you to the core of your being?

Many years ago I was hired as a psychotherapist by a religiously based counseling center. The sponsoring congregations spanned the entire religious spectrum from very liberal (the radical Quakers and United Church of Christ and Methodist) to very conservative, which I might add was Richard Nixon's Quaker church. The minister of that Quaker conservative church decided that if I was if not the devil at least I was the devil's agent here on earth and a modern day witch hunt ensued. He politicked against me, meeting with the other ministers and the lay members of the Board. I will say that the liberal Methodist minister supported me, campaigned for my retention and told his colleagues that I was acting more like a true Christian than they were. The Board decided to interview me about my religious beliefs. I told them the truth of what I believed. I was ushered out of the interview by a kindly but anemic Episcopalian priest who whispered to me, "Your theology is so radical! But you know it is exactly what I believe; just no one can know it." I left disgusted and desperate a sense of community with other people who held this same radical theology. I went to my first General Assembly full of bright faith. And what did I find? The same kind of limited thinking, a

lack of commitment to an inclusive faith, people who saw some people as holding the truth and others as duped. I saw religious battles between the Humanists and the theists not to mention the Christians. I was full of despair and decided to leave Unitarian Universalism. But I was married to a minister! And though in practice it wasn't perfect, it was what I believed. It was the faith that had saved my parents out on the isolated Kansas prairie. So I stood by this faith and survived my first crisis of faith, the first of many. But it is this questioning, this unwillingness to settle for less that transforms verifying faith into enduring faith.

I stood by this faith because it is the faith that inspires me and challenges me to live the life I want for myself and for others. It is the faith that does sustain me in times of trouble and uncertainty.

Faith does not require a belief system and is not dependent on a deity, though it doesn't deny one. Faith is a lantern that lights our way. It is how we structure our lives.

Faith thusly defined implies an openness to life in all its changes, challenges and opportunities. May it be so and Amen.